

SCIENCE & EDUCATION Impact

Benefits From the USDA/Land-Grant Partnership

Families at Risk

Helping families help themselves.

Child abuse, teen pregnancy, inadequate health care, violence, substance abuse: The litany of problems facing families and youth seems overwhelming. And with divorce, single-parent families, and child care issues, the list is growing. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Land-Grant universities are working hard on these problems. Researchers are gaining new insights into the causes of dysfunctional families and are putting that knowledge to use—teaching parents, kids, teachers, and caregivers how to do their jobs better so that families become stronger and the children of today become the healthy, productive adults of tomorrow.

Payoff

- **Care for kids.** In many states, finding quality child care is difficult if not impossible. **Iowa State** Extension helped establish 85 child-care home businesses serving 2,250 children. **Utah State** Extension provided training in food safety and nutrition, discipline, guidance and family relations, character building, and educational activities. More than 90 percent of the 516 participants planned to change their practices as a result of the program.
- **Easing tragedy.** Researchers from **Nebraska** have studied the psychological effects of miscarriage on families. The results will help health care professionals, counselors, and others work more effectively with families that have experienced this loss.
- **Doing time in class.** To teach life skills to young lawbreakers, **Nevada** Extension cooperated with juvenile courts, schools, and local volunteers. After the first year, the 74 teens in the program experienced a 130 percent increase in life skills knowledge. Parents saw improvement in their kids' attitudes toward school, and teens completed nearly 670 hours of community projects. "I know it's better to talk it out now than fight. I'm doing better in school too — instead of all F's, I'm getting A's and B's," one teen said.

RESEARCH,
EDUCATION, AND
EXTENSION
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- **Don't mix drinks and kids.** An **Iowa** program for rural youth and parents led to a 42 percent reduction in alcohol use among enrolled kids. The program has been modified for use with inner-city minority families as well.
- **Keeping kids out of trouble.** Improved grades for 30 percent of participating youth resulted from a **California** Extension program that provides activities before and after school and during the summer. Principals said participation helped 3 percent of the students avoid being held back a grade and kept 6 percent of the students out of special education classes. **Georgia, Iowa State, and New York** after-school programs had similar results.
- **No more tractor tippers.** **Nebraska** Extension plays a key role in a 30-year-old tractor safety training program for 14- and 15-year-olds. One teenager credits the course with teaching him the use of a maneuver that helped him avoid a potentially fatal tractor rollover.
- **Putting kids first.** For kids, divorce often leads to lower grades, more illness, trouble-making friends, and a higher risk of getting into trouble. **Illinois** research shows that participation in a program designed to put the needs of children first reduces the amount of conflict that children see and reduces the number of times divorcing parents must resolve issues in court. A program offered by **Minnesota** Extension has been praised by that state's supreme court and has been selected to be part of Minnesota's court-ordered lessons. Similar extension programs are used by courts in several **North Dakota, Ohio, and Oregon** counties. **Missouri** research reveals misconceptions and misunderstandings about the responsibilities of family members after divorce. The research offers guidance to professionals designing support and education programs.
- **Rooting out violence.** **Minnesota** researchers are identifying factors that put people at risk for violence and that help them overcome those risks. The researchers hope to give specialists the tools to design more effective programs for prevention and intervention. A **Virginia** Extension program addresses the insufficiencies in economic, interpersonal, and other

skills that lead to violence. In the last two years, only 16.5 percent of juvenile offenders in the program have committed another offense, compared to 40 percent for youth who are diverted from court action. A **Colorado** program teaches parents how to manage anger and avoid violent behavior. More than three-fourths of the participants said the program helped them reduce violence levels and gain more realistic expectations of children.

- **From worst to first.** In 1991, the West Central neighborhood of Spokane, Washington, was wracked by poverty, substance abuse, and child abuse and had the city's highest crime rate. **Washington State** Extension brought together a coalition of groups that reversed the area's decline through education aimed at improving money management, parenting skills, and conflict resolution. Today, the crime rate is the lowest in the city, and child-abuse reports have dropped.
- **Weighing in.** The latest research findings are presented by **Wisconsin** researchers in family impact seminars for lawmakers and policymakers. Topics range from teen sexuality to welfare reform and cover implications for pending laws and programs. State legislators rate the seminars as a valuable source of information on the issues, second only to direct input from constituents.
- **How-to for health.** Health education programs in **Tennessee** are changing the attitudes of teens. Surveys indicate that the program has helped more than 30,000 teens increase their knowledge about health. About 10,000 teens have indicated that they plan to adopt recommended health-enhancing behaviors.



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